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## DISCUSSION

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### COMMENCEMENT PROGRAMS

High schools, in modeling their commencement programs after the colleges, have made of them merely aimless exhibitions. We are often deceived by the attendance into believing that these exhibitions are enjoyed. It is personal interest in the graduates, not delight in the program, that brings the crowd. It is doubtful if anyone more distant than a first cousin of the speaker ever really enjoyed a high-school boy's commencement "oration."

Just why commencement should be marked by a flourish of amateurish oratory has never been shown. If such a demonstration does seem to be desirable, it is still not clear why we ought to select for its execution those students who have ranked highest in mathematics, chemistry, Latin, and zoölogy. Yet in a majority of cases it is "good grades" that fill the positions on the commencement stage.

What ordinarily occurs in preparation for these commencement programs is familiar to every high-school teacher who has had to do with their creation. The honored, but usually unhappy, student searches his memory and the files of old commencement programs for a suitable subject. He seizes upon one which has a euphonious ring, or upon one which he sees is well covered in the reader's guide, or perhaps upon one in which his high-school work has given him a decided interest and even a little knowledge.

Assiduous application to references and even more assiduous quotation (not always acknowledged) eventually result in the production of the "oration" or the "essay." As this is probably the first piece of literature of this specific character which the student has ever written, it will probably need more or less editing. This is done by some teacher, to a degree varying with her regard for the pupil or the publicity which is to be given the fact that it is in part her handiwork.

When in glancing at random through old commencement programs one encounters "The Race Problem," "Competition," "The Immigration Question," "The Cross or the Crescent," "The Ideal Successful Career," "World Peace," and "Nihil Sine Labore," and contemplates what the average high-school Senior of seventeen or eighteen must have said upon them, one wonders that commencement programs of this character have remained so long extant.

But without attempting any quarrel with the old custom of "speaking" at commencement, or with whatever method may be used in choosing the speakers, there are, it would seem, three elements in the average program which, from the standpoint of accomplishment, contribute to its failure. First, the student has usually only a meager comprehension of the subject which he presents; second, the audience has only an indirect interest in the question presented, and no interest in a juvenile discussion of it; and third, whatever idea the student originally had as to what constitutes effective speaking has either been stimulated into intoxication or sandbagged into inanity by the staggering announcement that he is to produce an "oration."

In an effort to evade these errors, the Joliet Township High School last year tried something new in commencement programs. We set down three things as essential: First, the speakers should talk on something which they understood; on something concerning which they could speak without reference to sources other than their own knowledge; and on something concerning which they knew more than the audience to whom they were speaking. Second, the speakers should not be impressed with the idea that they were preparing a formal address. Third, the talk should have a direct interest to, and therefore be capable of producing a direct effect upon, this audience. It was decided that most of the "coaching" should be done in giving the speakers a start in the right direction rather than in revision of the manuscripts, and that in such revision as was made, there should be an effort to make the composition have as local and personal an appeal as possible. As a result, the determination was reached that the commencement speakers should all deal with those phases of high-school life of which the audience would know, or would have thought, very little. This idea had the additional advantage that the entire program could be unified under the one title "Products and By-Products of High-School Life." How this idea was worked out can best be shown by the program which was given. Under the general heading given above came the "Salutatory." This, which was really little more than an introduction to the remainder of the program, began with these words:

*Mr. Chairman and People of Joliet:*

This high school is your school. As the taxpayers of the township of Joliet, you are the shareholders of this institution. In coming here tonight you come not merely as friends and visitors, you come as *owners*.

Upon former occasions similar to this it has been customary for the commencement speakers to attempt the discussion of questions of national and even world-wide importance.

Tonight we shall refrain from every such effort and shall try simply to render to you an account of some of the things which your high school is doing for us. The direct results of many lines of our work are already known to you; these we shall take for granted and dwell now upon some of the less conspicuous benefits connected with the various branches of our school activity. If, when we have finished, you shall feel that you know this school better; that you have a more complete knowledge of the dividends in trained boys and girls which your investment here is producing, we shall be satisfied that our commencement program has been a success. We shall have done the best thing that we can do—shown you our appreciation of the splendid high school which you have made it possible for us to attend.

The themes of the other speakers were as follows: "This High School as an Americanizer"; "Effect of Teachers upon the Student"; "Development from Physical Education in High School"; "The Desirability of a Knowledge of Chemistry"; "Some Practical Values of History and Literature"; "The Social Training of Our High-School Course"; "The Moral Lessons of High-School Work."

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*To the Editor of the "School Review":*

SIR: I have seen the review of my little *Short Stories for Oral French* in your January number. I sincerely welcome criticism of my book, but your reviewer has some misconceptions of its purpose. My *Oral French* has no connection with the series of French books which the Messrs. Scribner have announced. It is just a little waif all alone by itself, to help the teachers and the pupils who need it to do and love good oral work.

I thought the title *Oral French* was sufficiently explanatory in itself to make the purpose of the book clear. With my own classes I spend fifteen minutes the first day, ten the next, and five or six the next on one of the stories. When I covered twenty stories with a beginning class in Horace Mann High School, it was *additional oral* work "tacked on to" the regular, already heavy, course, and done gladly by my pupils because they loved it.

*Oral French* has no object but what the preface states, it has nothing to do with German methods or reform methods. It simply shows what has been completely successful for three years running in an American high school with classes of twenty boys and girls. It seems to work just as well in Teachers College in larger classes of older pupils.

When much work in translation is required, it is simply impossible to "treat it orally." Whatever *is* treated orally must be completely treated—and should lead to written work.

I think *Oral French* has enough material for two years' work at least. When it is completed, pupils have a good vocabulary and can use it in an animated way. I did think of adding "stories without questions," but most texts for reading have these. When any class is ready to graduate from *Oral French*, let it do so. When the wings can carry the birds, they fly—the earlier the better if the wings are strong enough to bear them up.

As to the "only grammatical topic treated"—the hard thing in French is the irregular verb. There *are* three conjugations in French—and irregular verbs. I tell my pupils at once that there *are* irregular verbs. I really *do* tell them the truth, but gradually, as they are able to bear it. May I say that by this method my beginners have at the end of their first year a very complete mastery of the French irregular verb, not excluding the dire subjunctive mood?

As to the vocabulary—your reviewer is very merciful; there are much worse things than he found, but I believe that they have all been changed for the second edition.

Your reviewer is right—it *is* hard to make a French-French vocabulary at once correct and simple. You see even two Frenchmen have found it so.

ANNA WOODS BALLARD

TEACHERS COLLEGE  
February 25

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#### A CORRECTION

*To the Editor of the "School Review":*

SIR: In my article on "The Second Year of a Modern Language," in the January number of the *School Review*, the peculiarity of the South German speech which makes *gehen* sound like *kehen* and *kehren* like *gehren* was erroneously described as "the tendency to make all stops into spirants and all spirants into stops" (p. 36, ll. 26, 27). The phrase should have been, "the failure to distinguish between voiced and voiceless stops."

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